

BolivianExpress

Free Distribution — Issue 10

Magazine



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The Bolivian Express would like to thank: Maddy Sryle, Maria Delgado, Sergio Quevedo, Angel Pinedo, Gonzalo Vargas Laserna Juan Manuel Lobaton

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La Paz – Bolivia, July 2011



GLOSSARY

Andina	Literally “Andean”, it is an umbrella term to describe the many Indigenous groups in Bolivia.
Api	A thick hot drink made from sweetened corn and cinnamon.
Aymara	A native Indigenous group, with its own language and culture, inhabiting areas of Bolivia and Peru.
Ch'alla	Ceremony that involves burning a pile of talismans, and throwing flower petals and confetti to bring luck and prosperity.
Chicha	A fermented corn drink coming from Cochabamba.
Cumbre	Top.
El Tio	The ‘Devil’ according to the Aymara People.
Fiesta	Spanish for party.
Morenada	A music and dance style from the Bolivian Andes characterized by a mixture of African and native elements.
Pachamama	'Mother Earth'; the Goddess worshiped by the Andean people.
Paceños	Adjective to describe Citizens of La Paz.
Pasante	The one who passes something over.
Preste	Person who presides over the festivities.
Recibiente	The one who receives.



TRADITIONAL

By Isaac Bloch

A COUNTRY OF TRADITIONS

Popular with tourists and unique among neighboring countries: there's no doubt that Bolivia is home to a myriad of cultures and communities. From the center of the Saya in Los Yungas to the bastion of a more Western lifestyle in Santa Cruz, Bolivia's vibrancy cannot be contained. It would be disingenuous to say that all the different parts of this society always function harmoniously, but the fact that they remain in flux is undoubtedly one of the things that makes this country so special.

The June issue of Bolivian Express skims the surface of this multicultural sea of sorts, not in attempt to provide anything close to a full account of all the different Bolivian ethnic and religious groups (as if such an account could ever be complete), but rather to offer the reader a taste of some of their festivals, rituals and practices. Recent celebrations such as El Gran Poder are examined, as well as yearlong ceremonies such as the Ch'allas of El Alto and Potosí. While inevitably some observances will be left out, these pages reveal the hidden sides of those that are explored.

With histories that often stretch hundreds of years into the past and current practices that retain their urgency for those who participate in them, these traditions are windows into distinctly Bolivian lives.

N.B. Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue. Their meanings can be found in the glossary below our credits



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ADVERTISING

PRESTE

MAYOR

THE HIDDEN SIDE OF THE GRAN PODER

TEXT AND PHOTO: LORANGEDAO

On June 18th, one of the major traditional events in La Paz took place in the heart of city (see article on El Gran Poder, p X). Thousands of people filled the streets to watch the sixty or so dancing groups. Whether they chose to attend the event or stay away from the dazzling crowd, everyone in La Paz knew about the parade. Two weeks before, however, another event related to the Gran Poder was organized for a more intimate audience: the Preste Mayor.

The party started in a small center located in Calle Juan Granier, where the guests gathered, started to drink and chat as the band 'Los Dignos Amantes' played some traditional tunes. After a while, the whole procession of people began to leave the premises, filling the streets and dancing to the sound of Morenadas until they reached their final destination on Avenida Baptista.

On that Saturday, the 'pasantes' or current prestes introduced the new prestes to the community. From then until the Sunday after the Gran Poder, the new couples are known as 'recibientes'. This year's pasantes or prestes – that is, the couple who is responsible for the organization of the three-day party (Saturday: Gran Poder; Sunday: Diana; Monday: fiesta within each dancing group) – were Fabiola and Richard Carvajal, meat traders by profession. On Saturday 4th June, they introduced the 'recibientes', that is the next two prestes who will have to organize the party in 2012. A week after the Gran Poder, the latter will officially become pasantes themselves.

"Being preste is an honour," Richard declared, "It doesn't matter how much money you spend, it's just a way to thank the Lord for all his blessings. Every time we need something, we just pray and the Lord grants it to us."

"In the beginning, the Gran Poder, short for 'Fiesta del Señor Jesús del Gran Poder,' was aimed at showing one's faith, and in the pueblos, to share after the crops. However, nowadays, it's also a reason to party," Fernando Valencia, presidente de la Asociación de Conjuntos Folklóricos del Gran Poder, adds.

After the whole ceremony, the pasantes keep a replica of the 'Tata' (the statue of Jesús del Gran Poder) to reward them for their efforts to organize the party and what they spent. Throughout the year, they are expected to organize events to raise money for the parish.

These behind-the-scenes exchanges and ceremonies make up just as an important part of the tradition of Gran Poder as the well known ostentatious costumes, religious expressions and communal imbibing that take place on the principle day.

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AYMARA NEW YEAR

Text: Senica Garrison

Photo: Tim Snell



June 21st marked the 5,519th annual celebration of Aymara New Year, and an estimated 50,000 participants migrated to the Tiwanaku ruins for a freezing all-nighter of fun and timeless tradition. People began arriving at the ruins that lie about two hours outside of La Paz around 6pm in the evening, but micros and taxis bused excited locals and tourists there well into the wee hours of the morning – no one wanted to miss the festivities and abundance of alcohol that the night promised. All down the normally quiet streets of the small town that surrounds Tiwanaku, vendors bartered the prices of api for the hungry, gloves for the unprepared, and soy burgers for the hippies.

While live Andean music and the occasional firework were present from the get-go, the real ceremony begins around one in the morning and builds and builds until the pinnacle of the Aymaran New Year – 'Wilkakuti' or 'return of the sun' in Aymara.

For those unfamiliar with the Ayma-

ra, they are an ancient, indigenous people previously conquered by the Incas. They have lived in Bolivia for the past 2,000 years and remain the country's largest pre-Hispanic ethnic group. The Aymara are historically an agricultural people and, therefore, placed their New Year on the Winter Solstice (the coldest, darkest night of the year). Praying and giving offerings of coca, alcohol, and a llama to Pachamama until sunrise on the most miserably cold night of the year entices Tata Inti, the sun god, to give the farmers a good harvest that year.

While the traditions are still taken quite seriously, the modern day celebration is attended mainly by the younger population and is more of party than a night of sacrifice. One participant of Aymara descent said that she comes every year to dance through the whole night, not to see shamans do their thing. Nonetheless, right before first light, Yatiris, Aymara traditional healers, still pour their offerings of alcohol on the ground as they chant "Jallalla" ("cheers to mother

earth"), and a llama is sacrificed, its blood splashing on those seeking luck. The folds of the llama's heart are believed to tell the future for those who know how to read them, but most seem to be having too much fun to worry about what the bloody mess has to tell them. Maybe if someone had taken the time to see the future for the festival itself they would have seen the controversy it would face. When Aymara New Year was declared a national holiday in 2009 by President Evo Morales, it did two things: ballooned up the celebration and turned it into a hot-button issue. More and more vendors and entertainers come out and the crowds have quadrupled in size. One vendor said that she is glad it's an official holiday because it spreads the Aymara culture to the rest of the country. However, there are two sides to absolutely everything and while it seems silly to protest a holiday, those who dispute the holiday have some good points.

One of their principle arguments comes from a feeling of misrep-





resentation of the non-Aymara citizens of Bolivia. President Evo is a former Aymara coca farmer, and since he has assumed his office he has taken many steps to forward the visibility of Bolivia's indigenous people, namely the Aymara. While this is almost universally recognized as good thing, Bolivia's constitution still clearly defines the country as "plurinational." So imposing an Aymara holiday on non-Aymara citizens does not go down so well when there are 36 other indigenous groups with their own festivals that remain undeclared. Mostly people just do not like seeing their President play favorites, which some call discrimination.

There are also many arguments against the legitimacy of the holiday as a whole. Though this is supposed to be the 5,519th time Aymara New Year has been celebrated, there is very little historical evidence about the event before the arrival of the Spanish a mere 450-odd years ago. Others explain the lack of evidence by suggesting that Aymara New Year was engendered from the Incan

festival of Inti Raymi (the sun god). Incan Emperor Pachacutec imposed the celebration on all Incan and conquered people in the 16th century. Furthermore, when the Spanish arrived, they made no record of an Aymara New Year, but did write about Inti Raymi. Now there would be nothing wrong with celebrating Inti Raymi here in Bolivia, nothing wrong with calling it Aymara New Year, either. But if it is going to be declared a national holiday, it should at least be a genuine historical day. It's a bit much to impose an Aymara holiday on non-Aymara if said holiday is only celebrated because the Incas imposed it on the Aymara to begin with. Get all that?

The third and possibly most reasonable argument deals with the location of the celebration: the Tiwanaku ruins. They provide an amazing setting for the night's mystic activities, but Tiwanaku had its own inhabitants once upon a time, and they weren't Aymara. They are simply known as 'the people of Tiwanaku'. They had no written language and so very

little is known about them, but most historians and anthropologists consider them quite separate from the Aymara. Despite this well-known fact, the ruins are subject to vandalism and all of the unavoidable damage that the presence of 50,000 Aymara parties inevitably leads to. The ruins are actually under threat of losing their status as a world heritage site because of amount of deterioration it's under gone in the past decade.

Although these concerns were far from the minds of the masses as they gathered under the Winter Solstice stars, there appear to be some simple solutions to this great New Year debate. Change the location. Declare some more ethnic groups' festivals as national holidays. Or take away the "national holiday" title altogether; Aymara New Year would surely survive without it. The cons of the celebration raise some serious problems, but take anyone out on the chilling night of June 21st, wrap them in a blanket and hand them a beer and they'll soon see the magic of this holiday.





Aymara New Year

A Photo essay by Tim Snell





GRAN PODER

Text: Georgia Wolff
Photos: Juan Manuel Lobaton

In La Paz the fiesta never stops: paceños never miss an opportunity for a celebration and they know how to party hard. Rarely a day goes by when one of the city's streets isn't closed to host a festival or the Plaza del Estudiante isn't filled with University students performing a dance for the crowd. It is cultured to say the least, and has a busy annual schedule of different artistic events, one of the most important of these being El Gran Poder.

Characterised by elaborately decorated costumes and an impressive parade of various dance groups, El Gran Poder is one of the most important traditional and religious celebrations in La Paz. The rituals performed annually at the festival offer a glimpse of both the traditional Andina cultures as well as those of the Catholic religion. It celebrates the work of different folkloric and dance groups from around Bolivia and is unique to, and celebrated by, the entire city.

El Gran Poder, literally "The Great Power", is more formally known as La Festividad de Nuestro Señor Jesús del Gran Poder. As is apparent from its name, this festival focuses on the dedication by the participants to Christ as the second 'person' in the Holy Trinity, based on a painting of the Trinity held in the Templo de la Calle Antonio Gallardo. "We dance for the Catholic Church, for the Saints and we also dance for the Pachamama," explained Eddie

Sabala, a long-time dancer in the event and follower of the Catholic faith.

El Gran Poder also focuses on thanksgiving to the Pachamama, a fundamental figure of worship for Andina people. Each year on the Saturday preceding the Feast of the Holy Trinity, thousands of paceños gather on the streets to eagerly participate in the festivities that are unique to the ceremony.

El Gran Poder has been celebrated annually in La Paz since the year 1939, when it began as a small-scale celebration focused around a candlelit procession. Over the following years local embroiderers introduced different folk aspects to the festival and these days it is so extensive that arrangements begin months prior to the day. When asked about length of time necessary to prepare his dance routine, Sabala commented that he is involved in dance practises for almost the entire year.

The importance of the day for paceños is clearly demonstrated in the preparations undertaken and the willingness of many participants to invest much of their earnings in masks and decorative costumes which can sometimes cost in the hundreds of dollars. The parade begins in the morning with the celebrations reaching their height by the early evening, eventually concluding around midnight. The event involves a diverse exhibition of dances led by the image of Christ as well as performances by brass bands, all of whom are dressed extravagantly in different costumes and masks.

There are a number of traditional Bolivian dances featured in El Gran Poder, each representing a different group and each with a particular meaning. Essential to the festival is the Morenada dance, which exposes the abuse of the black slaves and the inhumane treatment they experienced in the mines and vineyards. Some of the more





Ch'alla

Text: Nina Triado
Photo: Lorange Dao

It took me a while to find the location, but after asking many people I made my way up to El Alto where I was told I could find a ch'alla. However, not knowing exactly what I was looking for, or what a ch'alla actually looked like, the search was a struggle. Soon after a short walk around one of the streets, the smell of incense and fire came alive. Stalls lined the street one after another, each housing a bench and a small fire. An elderly woman was sitting by one of the fires with a man holding a silver bowl over her head, performing the blessing in Aymara. A man called me over from a few stalls away. After I had squeezed myself onto his bench, he explained to me about the ritual being performed at the adjacent stall. The bowl contained coca leaves, fruits and confetti – a traditional mix of items which are used to perform a ch'alla. By lighting the bowl on fire the man was able to save her from El Tio and cure her physical health.

Generally speaking: to the faithful a ch'alla is seen as a blessing to the Pachamama, through which believers strengthen their relationship with her. Nevertheless, beyond this common cause, practices vary so widely that it is near impossible for us to identify a single definition of a ch'alla. Aymara tradition dictates one rite, other cultures another, and practices not only vary between town and countryside, but also among neighbourhoods. My informant explained the matter from his perspective: an Aymara man from a neighbourhood in El Alto.

In this man's neighbourhood many people receive a ch'alla

every second weekend. However, others believe it should only be practiced during important events such as Carnival. Essentially, performing ch'alla usually involves spilling some liquid, usually alcohol, on the ground as an offering to the Pachamama. The noun "ch'alla" is originally Aymara, although it has been hispanised to create the verb "challar", "to bless". This verbal blend of Spanish and Aymara well characterises the blurring of religious traditions in Bolivia: ch'alla is not a Christian ritual, nevertheless, many Christian Bolivians still practice this ancient Andean rite, emblematic of the syncretism that pervades this diverse country.

The sound of bells began to ring. I looked back over to the stall and saw the man holding a bell in his right hand jingling it first around the lady's head, and then on her body. The man explained that this noise was to scare away the evil spirit. He continued to tell me that many Aymara people partake in this form of ch'alla as often as once every two weeks in order to keep them away from any danger and to bring luck in their lives.

This ritual also varies from the city to the country-side. Within the city, ch'allas include decorating one's property or car with coloured streamers and sprinkling alcohol, golden grains, daisy petals and candies all around it. In the countryside however, the ch'allas could include covering the earth with flower petals and burying a pot with cooked potatoes, cigarettes, coca leaves and alcohol to feed the Pachamama. Each ch'alla however has the

same motive, a blessing to the Pachamama.

Whatever the cause for the ch'alla rites, they are more commonly practiced in smaller communities than large urban centres. Potosi is an especially interesting example, because the ch'alla takes on a significance specific to the mining community's environment: it is performed to protect them from El Tio. The miners believe they work under the guidance of this familiar devil, whom they both respect and fear. El Tio must be 'fed' and satisfied in order to ensure their working conditions are safe. Twice a year, on three consecutive Saturdays, each mining group sacrifices a llama – in hopes of feeding the hunger of El Tio. Within the mines, each of the 48 mining groups have built thousands of 'Tios' out of mud and rocks – and have decorated them with gloves, miners boots, coca leaves, streamers and confetti. They are seen as the 'observers' of the mines and are most significant during the ch'alla ritual and festivity time. After the killing of the llama, a man who feels brave enough to face El Tio must nominate himself to run in and splatter llama blood over the statue. The ritual is completed with the celebrations involving wine drinking, coca leaf chewing, and swigging 96% strength alcohol.

The ch'alla ritual is indicative of Bolivian identity; it incorporates both Hispanic and Aymara traditions and through its varied forms of practice embodies a truly Bolivian diversity. But ultimately it is not the details of practice, but the act of blessing itself that generates the common relationship that believers have with the Pachamama.

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Cultural Calendar

TEATRO MUNICIPAL "ALBERTO SAAVEDRA PÉREZ", Calle Jenaro Sanjinés, corner w Calle Indaburo

Monday 11 and Tuesday 12 - hrs. 19:30
Luisa Molina is back

The performer of "Falso Amor y Falso Corazón", who currently lives in the U.S., is coming back to Bolivia to meet her audience again and share the stage with other national artists she worked with during her career.

Wednesday 13 and Thursday 14 - hrs. 19:30
Luis Salinas, on his way from Argentina

"Ensamble con Altura" presents the famous Argentinian artist Luis Salinas, who's considered to be one of the best guitarists on earth. Amongst other, he plays jazz, folklore, tango and blues.

Saturday 16 - hrs. 17:30
Departamental Efeméride
Commemoration of the 1809 July Revolution.

Sunday 17 and Monday 18 - hrs. 19:30
Small format theatre

Tunka Llatunkani Enkuentro of Small Format Theatre (19th edition) presents works whose duration won't exceed 45 minutes.

Wednesday 20 and Thursday 21 - hrs. 19:30
A tribute to La Paz

The Paceño singer-songwriter Rodrigo Rojas, who's been living for a few years in Mexico, is coming back to present his new song "Volver a La Paz", a tribute to his city which is included in his latest album.

Friday 22 and Saturday 23 - hrs. 19:30
Masters' music

In its tradition to perform the works of the major national authors, la Orquesta Criolla Música de Maestros gives the two concerts "Recorriendo las huellas del mestizaje siglos XIX y XX".

MODESTA SANGINES THEATRE – FRANZTAMAYO Cultural Centre – Av. Mariscal Santa Cruz corner w Potosi

Tuesday 12 - hrs. 19:30
And from Thursday 14 to Saturday 16 – hrs. 19:30
Small format theatre

Tunka Llatunkani Enkuentro (19th edition) of Small Format Theatre presents works whose duration won't exceed 45 minutes.

Wednesday 13 - hrs. 19:30
Bolivian Music beyond borders

Although currently residing in Germany, the folk group Ukamau is back home to give a concert reflecting its 33 years of existence.

From Tuesday 19 to Thursday 21 - hrs. 19:30
Alternative Music Proposal

The Espacio Simón I. Patiño and Cedoal organize the first Festival of Alternative Bolivian Musics called "Alter-Nativa".

Friday 22 - hrs. 19:30
Tribute to Bolivian Composers

As a tribute to the work of national music authors y composers, the Bolivian Academy of Singing, run by Miguel Ángel Bueno, presents the show "La Cueva Boliviana".

Tuesday 26 - hrs. 14:00 to 22:30
Disabled people's art

The Centro de Artes Escénicas Kusisa Satiri brings to stage the Segundo Encuentro de Danza y Teatro "Nosotros también podemos" (We also can), where the protagonists are disabled people.

Wednesday 27 and Thursday 28 - hrs. 19:30
Magic show

The Bolivian Magic Centre, run by Andrés Gagliardi, presents an illusion performance called "Magia ahora y siempre".

Friday 29 - hrs. 19:30
Folk music

The Bolivian produtor and singer Neyza, who's been living in the U.S. Since 2000, comes back home to perform her latest musical production called "Reencuentro".

CINE TEATRO MUNICIPAL "6 DE AGOSTO". Av. 6 de Agosto corner w Rosendo Gutiérrez

Saturday 16 and Sunday 17 - hrs. 19:30
Amalia de Gallardo

Short-movies from the municipal video competition "Amalia de Gallardo" related to La Paz.

TEATRO AL AIRE LIBRE "JAIME LAREDO" Avenida del Ejército corner w Avenida del Poeta

Monday 18
Patch Adams – hrs. 19:00

The reknown doctor Patch Adams – famous for using laughter as a therapy to cure diseases – will give a motivational conference.

Friday 22 – hrs. 20:00
Charly García in La Paz

Emblematic Argentinian musician, sing-songwriter.

Sunday 24 – hrs 09:00
Music for solidarity

The Bolivian actress, Carla Ortiz, organizes a concert with various national artists, for the people in need.

LIVING THE DEATH ROAD

TEXT: IVAN RODRIGUEZ P.
PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN CACERES

PART 2



The rough earth track is beginning to make itself felt, and the Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking team makes a stop to instruct us on how to proceed from here. The road from La Cumbre had been tarmac, but now turns into a different experience: "stones, mud, curves and the odd bus are what you can expect to encounter", explained our guides. Five years ago a new tarmac road was built to Coroico, and since then the vast majority of private and public vehicles choose that road rather than risk the Death Road. Still precarious, the old road now serves as a beautiful and spectacular bicycle path. Our group of twelve customer cyclists and two guides begins to move along the dry earth, and the green foliage thickens as we drop down into ever more luxuriant

vegetation. On the left, a panoramic view stretches out: mountain beyond mountain in dark-green hues, the horizon seems to herald our approach to paradise.

The track is wider than I thought, I feel like its name belies what I am experiencing. Then I am reminded of the very real danger as my eyes dart to the left to see drops of many hundreds of meters with no safety barrier whizz past my eyes. I quickly bring my eyes back to the road, narrow perhaps for cars, atop a good quality mountain bike with excellent brakes this road need not be more dangerous than any other mountain-biking terrain, and it is a descent you will never forget for the rest of your life. As we continue to advance on our journey the adrenaline begins to

abate and gives way to other feelings altogether: a sense of freedom and power fill my spirit as I thunder along the famous death road. In less than half an hour we have passed from an icy temperature of about zero degrees, to a sweaty trajectory on which we pant eagerly for the next stop: our opportunity to rip off another stuffy item of clothing and feel briefly cooled. It's so satisfying, and makes me proud to be in Bolivia, a country of so many natural wonders and dizzying landscapes. And back to pedalling, I tell myself: the road forces me to focus as we approach a small uphill slope, and I strain, sweating more heavily. No distractions are permitted on this arresting adventure. Stay tuned for the next stop at Senda Verde.



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"UNTITLED"
by Ivan Rodríguez P.

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